

ATTRACTIONS THEATRICAL ORGAN


Workers roll Mighty Mo, the famous Fox Theatre organ, across the stage while reinstalling it Dec. 8. The organ console has just been through a yearlong renovation. BEN GRAY/FOR THE AJC

Mighty Mo returns to Fox

Rebuilt organ put back in place after year-long renovation.

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MIGHTY MO ORGAN, REFURBISHED, RETURNS TO THE FOX THEATRE – After a \$500,000 renovation, the fabulously ornate console of the Fox Theatre’s Möller theatrical organ is back home, ready to rise out of the orchestra pit and shine once more.

Built in 1929, the Mighty Mo is one of the biggest theatrical organs in the country, and one of the most famous.

“People know about this Möller organ,” said Ken Double, who, with Rick McGee, serves as house organist at the Fox.

Double was on hand Tuesday as the Möller was delivered from a Lithonia organ builder and dollied back to center stage.

The scuffed, cracked and flaking case had been transformed. The cigarette burns (from a previous organist, back when smoking was allowed in the theater) were erased. The entire console was wrapped in a new garment of imitation gold leaf, shining like the Tin Man just back from the beauty parlor.

“Look at that!” said Double, as the metallic skin bounced high-lights all over the darkened Fox.



The Fox Theatre’s Möller organ is the biggest theater organ that the Möller organ company ever built. Reportedly Möller went overboard while building the console, seen here center stage at the Fox, and had to take down a wall to get the console out of their Hagerstown, Md. factory. BEN GRAY FOR THE ATLANTA JOURNAL-CONSTITUTION

“Can you imagine what the spotlight will do with that when it comes out of the pit?”

John Tanner, one of the craftsmen responsible for the rehab, smiled as he imagined audiences swooning: “Medical personnel,” he said, “will be standing by.”

Planning for the renovation began in the summer of 2019, when the A.E. Schlueter Pipe Organ Company was brought on to troubleshoot the Mighty Mo’s problems and devise a solution. One of the main problems was

age. Others were injuries, including one from the 1970s, when a stalker dashed across the Fox’s stage and fell on top of the keyboard; a rock and roll musician did the same thing at another show. Finally, the Fox built a heavy steel cage that fits around the console when the organ isn’t in use.

But age and time are the organ’s chief antagonists. a cage can’t protect from time’s wear and tear. Arthur Schlueter III, second-generation organ builder, could peer inside the console and see

VIRTUAL EVENT Mighty Mo concert 10 a.m. Dec. 25.

Fox Theatre’s YouTube channel

Ken Double will record a concert on the refurbished Mighty Mo this month. The performance streams Christmas Day. The concert includes vocalist Daniel Mata, and selections such as “The Christmas Song,” “I’m Dreaming of a White Christmas,” “I’ll Be Home for Christmas,” “Winter Storms,” and “Feliz Navidad.”

repairs dating back to the 1960s.

In that era Westinghouse electrical engineer and organ enthusiast Joe Patten was retained by the Fox to put the ailing organ back in working order. (Patten would go on to co-found Atlanta Landmarks, the non-profit that saved the Fox itself from destruction and kick-started the preservation movement in Atlanta. From around 1980 until his death in 2016 Patten lived in a 3,600 square-foot apartment upstairs at the Fox, in one of the building’s labyrinthine private areas.)

Two of the organ’s weak points, then and now, were the pneu-

Mighty continued on **D4**



Craftsmen scraped through many layers of paint on the side panels of the Möller organ console to find the original colors of some of the organ's decorative elements. They then matched those colors with contemporary paint. BEN GRAY FOR THE ATLANTA JOURNAL-CONSTITUTION

Mighty

continued from D1

matic switches inside the console and the bundle of 4,000-plus wires that snaked out of the base of the console in a trunk as thick as a two-liter Coke bottle.

The wires carried signals from the console to the pipe chambers, high up on the walls to the right and left of the stage. The pipes and orchestral instruments operated by the console are hidden in these chambers under ornate archways and behind gilded grills, masquerading as box seats.

Repeatedly stressed as the organ was lifted out of the orchestra pit on its elevator, many of the wires had shorted out.

Schlueter removed the pneumatic relays and the bundle of wires and replaced them with a purpose-built micro-computer and a few slim Ethernet cables.

"They've taken this 1920s technology and brought it to the 21st century, which is where we play music," said Double.

Before the console was removed for repairs, the Schlueter company constructed

a twin console (which they call the Faux Mo) to serve in Mighty Mo's absence. The idea was that singalongs and concerts (and the occasional silent movie) could continue with the majestic Möller accompaniment while the console was in the shop.

Little did they know that a pandemic would arrive and the Fox would be dark for most of that time.

Still, building the highly-detailed Faux Mo wasn't a wasted effort, said Schlueter. Keeping it in the Fox meant that Double and McGee could keep practicing, which meant the organ and all its pipes and windchests would be played regularly.

"It allowed it to continue to exercise," said Schlueter. "It's 90 years old. If it's not getting exercise, it can atrophy."

Traditionalists may be upset by the changes to the organ. The original stop tabs, which were made of nitrocellulose (an explosive material also used in munitions) have been replaced with plastic tabs. In the course of being disassembled, the ivory veneers on the four keyboards were also replaced with plastic veneers.

But every part taken out of the console has been stored in

the Fox's archives. Theoretically, if a billionaire wanted to put it back together the way it was, it would be possible.

On Tuesday the time came to put Mighty Mo back on its elevator at stage right. This is the kind of ticklish moment that gives Arthur Schlueter Jr. nightmares. Anticipating this exchange, "I couldn't sleep last night," confessed the founder of the organ company, as he observed the reinstallation.

About a dozen men gathered around the half-ton instrument, each taking an available hand-hold.

"Please take off any rings and move your belt buckle out of the way," called out a staffer. Then at a count of three everyone lifted while pulling the dolly out from under the console, gandy-dancing as they stepped over the slats of the roller. "Watch your feet!" said another voice.

The gilded throne settled back down on its platform without incident. No feet were engaged.

"It's probably nicer today than it was when it arrived in 1929," said Allan Vella, president and CEO of the Fox as he peered into the interior.

All heaved a sigh of relief.